DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 089 HE 028 276

AUTHOR	Otuya, Ebo
TITLE	The Foreign-Born Population of the 1990s: A Summary Profile.
INSTITUTION	American Council on Education, Washington, D.C. Div. of Policy Analysis and Research.
PUB DATE	94
NOTE	13p.
AVAILABLE FROM	American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20036 (single copy $10; 8-issue annual subscription $58).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Research Briefs; v5 n6 1994
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Demography; *Educational Attainment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Employment Patterns; English (Second Language); *Enrollment; Family Income; Higher Education; *Immigrants; *Language Proficiency; Low Income; Poverty

ABSTRACT

This report examined the demographic characteristics, educational attainment, language ability, labor force participation, and income levels of citizen and non-citizen immigrants in the United States in 1990. Based on recent census data, the report found that the foreign-born population of the United States, at nearly 20 million, is growing 4 times faster than the total U.S. population, and is the fastest growing segment of the population. Nearly 2.2 million immigrant children were enrolled in the nation's elementary and secondary schools, and about 2 million immigrants were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. Nearly half of all immigrants reported that they did not speak English "very well," and 28 percent reported they lived in households where very little or no English was spoken. About 20 percent of all immigrants in the civilian labor force were employed in managerial and professional fields. Of this figure, 44 percent were employed in health services and 29 percent were in educational services. As many as 45 percent of immigrants had household incomes lower than $25,000, and 15 percent of all immigrant families lived in poverty. (MDM)

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The foreign-born population of the United States (nearly 20 million) is growing four times faster than the total U.S. population. Immigrants from Asia and Mexico alone accounted for nearly one-half (47 percent) of this growth between 1980 and 1990.
- About 2.2 million immigrant children were enrolled in the nation's elementary/secondary schools in 1990, accounting for nearly 5 percent of all children enrolled in U.S. elementary/secondary schools that year.
- Approximately 2 million immigrants (47 percent of all immigrants enrolled in school) were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 1990; 75 percent of these students attended public institutions.
- Among immigrants, nearly one-half do not speak English "very well," and 28 percent live in households where very little or no English is spoken.
- About 20 percent of all immigrants in the U.S. civilian labor force (more than 2 million) were employed in managerial and professional fields in 1990. Of this figure, 44 percent were employed in the health services and 29 percent were in educational services.
- As many as 45 percent of immigrants had annual household incomes lower than $25,000, and 15 percent of all immigrant families lived in poverty in 1989.

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The Foreign-Born Population of the 1990s: A Summary Profile

by EBO OTUYA

The influx of foreign-born persons or immigrants[1] into the United States is a significant factor in the recent expansion of the total U.S. population. In 1980, there were 14.1 million immigrants in the United States, or 6.2 percent of the nation's total population. By 1990, the immigrant population had reached nearly 20 million people, or approximately 8 percent of the total U.S. population. This represented a growth rate of 40 percent — four times the 10 percent growth rate for the entire population between 1980 and 1990.

As the nation becomes increasingly aware of the growing number of immigrants, including foreign students and illegal aliens, there is a need to learn more about their characteristics. Who are the immigrants? Where do they come from? How do they fare when they get here? These and many more questions are explored in this profile of the nation's foreign-born population.

This brief specifically examines the demographic characteristics, educational attainment, language ability, labor force participation, and income levels of citizen[2] and non-citizen[3] immigrants in 1990. The goal is to help the higher education community and the nation better understand the fastest-growing segment of its population. 1990 Bureau of the Census data from *The Foreign-Born Population of the United States* were used in the analysis.

Demographic Characteristics

The Foreign-Born Population

Foreign-born persons represented 8 percent (20 million) of the total U.S. population in 1990 (Census, 1993). (See Figure 1 and sidebar.) Of this population, naturalized citizens accounted for 40 percent (8 million), and non-citizen immigrants made up 60 percent (11.8 million) (Figure 1). However, a majority of citizen immigrants (84 percent) have lived in the United States for more than 10 years.

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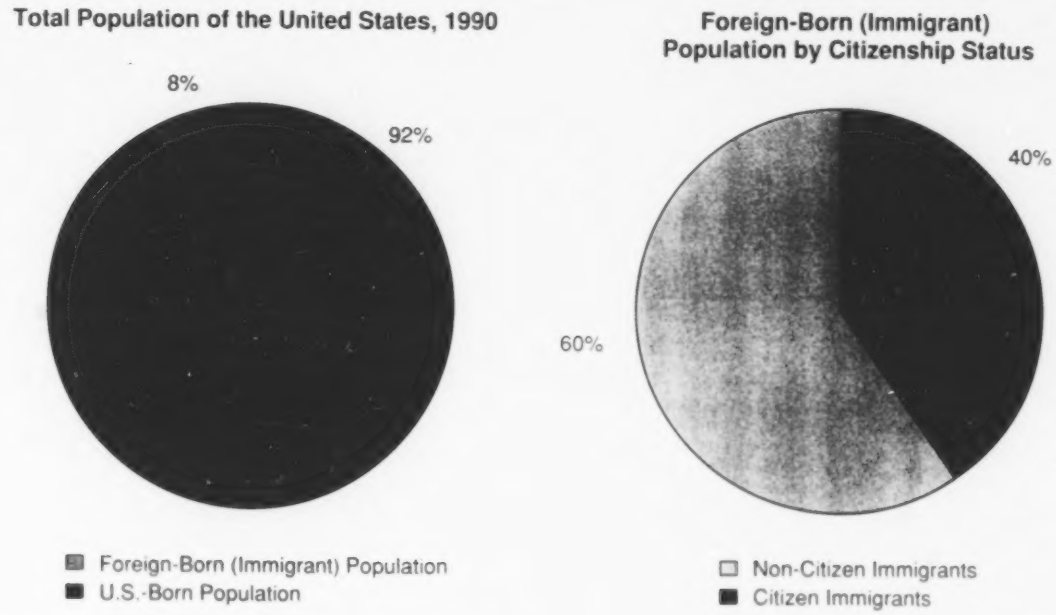
Figure 1



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Population Profile of the United States. Current Population Reports, Special Studies P 23-185.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993.

THE FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION

The foreign-born immigrant population studied in this *Research Brief* refers to a segment of the U.S. population that comprises ***all foreign-born persons*** (including foreign students and illegal aliens) who resided in the United States at the time of the 1990 Census.

This population does not include:

- Persons born abroad with at least one American parent;
- Persons born in the United States to foreign-born parents; or
- Persons temporarily visiting or traveling in the United States.

The terms "foreign-born persons" and "immigrants" are used interchangeably in this *Research Brief*. The use of the term "immigrants" does not follow the U.S. Department of Justice's Immigration and Naturalization Service's definition.

compared with only 37 percent of their non-citizen peers. As a result, citizen immigrants are relatively better educated, communicate better in English, and have greater access to better-paying jobs. This suggests that adjustment skills development, integration, and greater participation of newly arrived immigrants in the society occur over time.

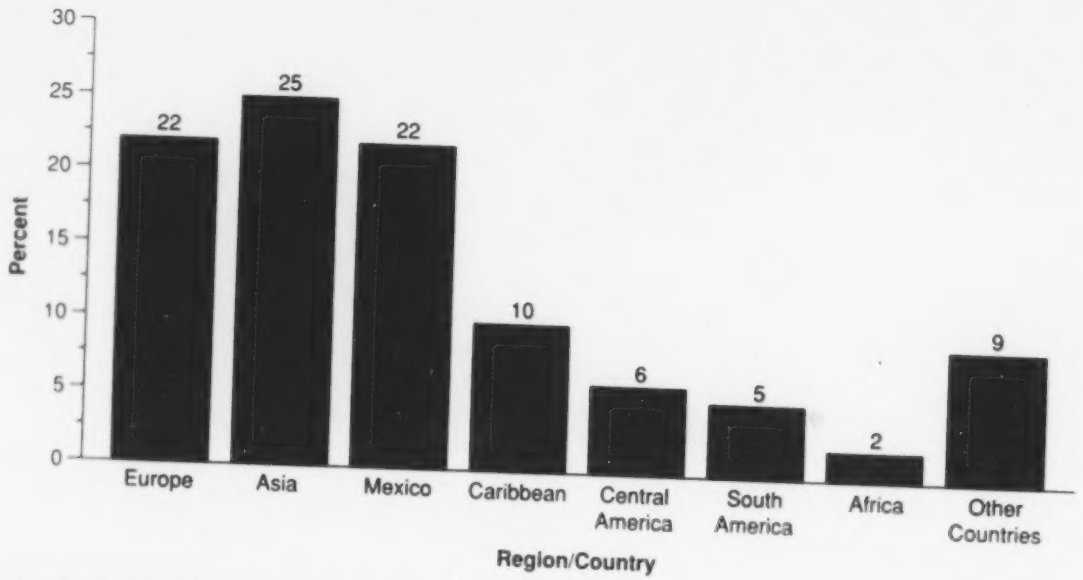
Region of Emigration

A large number of immigrants of European descent were admitted to the United States in the early decades of the 20th century. However, there has been a considerable shift in the number of immigrants and their place of origin since the mid-1960s. The Immigration Act of 1965[4] paved the way for persons from all parts of the world to migrate to the United States in larger numbers. The great majority of these newcomers have come from Latin America and Asia. The data show that:

- In 1990, the majority of U.S. immigrants were from Asia (25 percent), Europe (22 percent), and Mexico (22 percent) (Figure 2).
- Other regions accounting for more than 1 million U.S. immigrants included the Caribbean (10 percent), Central America (6 percent), and South America (5 percent).

Figure 2

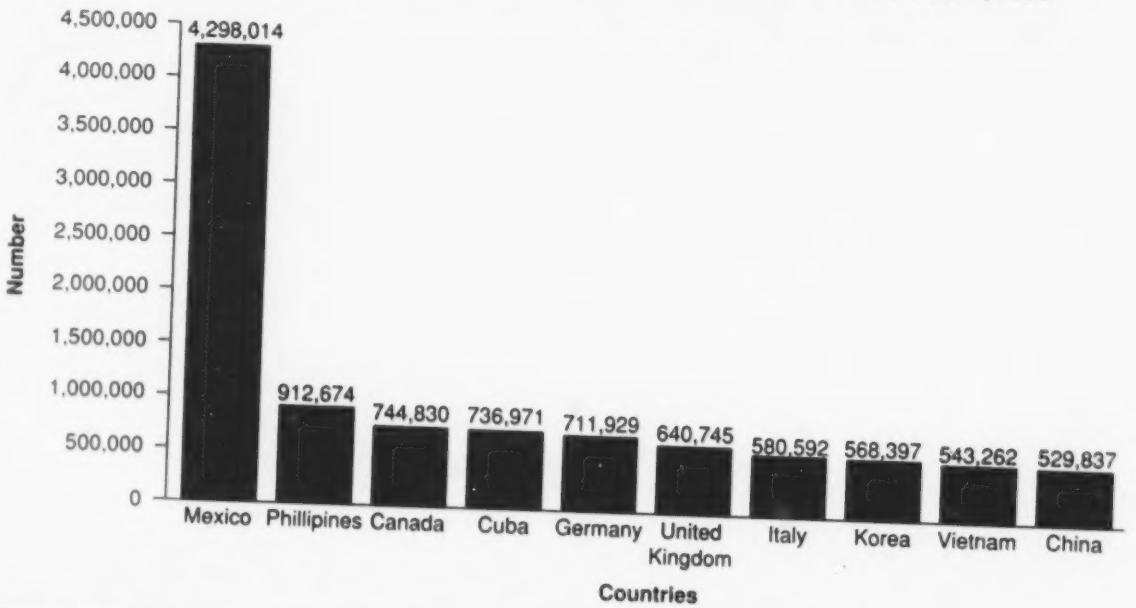
Foreign-Born Population by Region/Country of Emigration, 1990



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Population Profile of the United States. Current Population Reports, Special Studies P 23-185.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993.

Figure 3

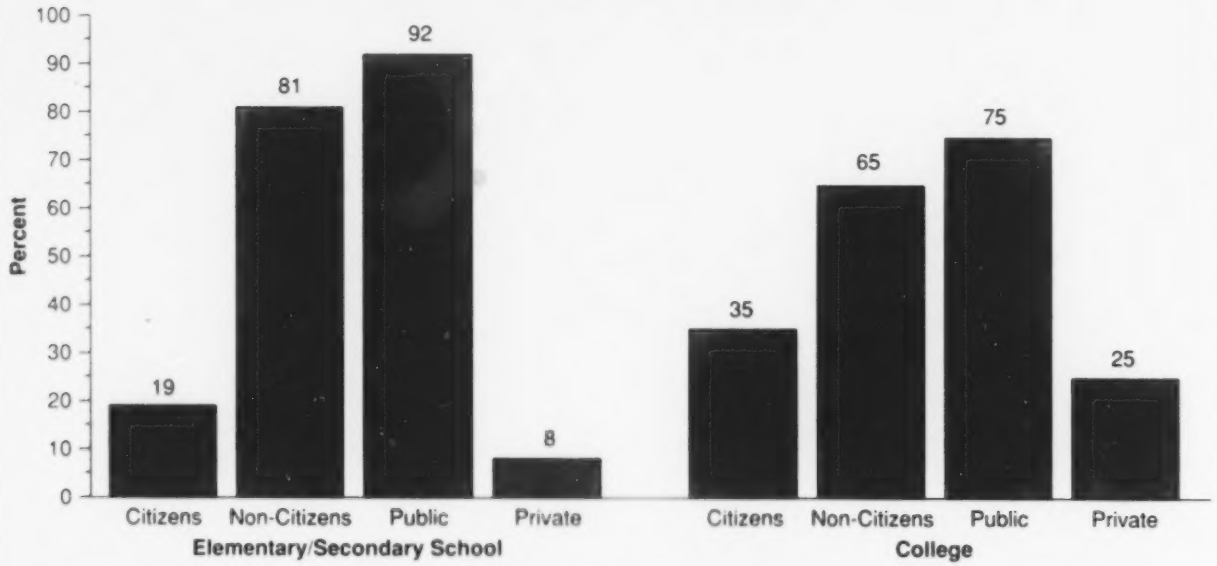
Countries with More Than 500,000 Foreign-Born Persons in the United States, 1990



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Population Profile of the United States. Current Population Reports, Special Studies P 23-185.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993.

Figure 4

Foreign-Born Persons Enrolled in Elementary/Secondary Schools and Colleges by Citizenship Status and Control of Institution, 1990



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *The Foreign-Born Population of the United States. 1990 CP-3-1.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993.

- Africa is the region with the lowest number of immigrants to the United States (2 percent).

- The top ten countries that contributed more than 500,000 immigrants to the United States as of 1990 were Mexico, the Philippines, Canada, Cuba, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Korea, Vietnam, and China (Figure 3).

- More than 70 percent of new U.S. immigrants each year settle in six states—California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois. Other states that receive large numbers of immigrants include Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Virginia, as well as Washington, DC (Stewart, 1993).

Other Selected Characteristics

The following summary describes selected demographic characteristics of immigrants to the United States in 1990:

- There were slightly more women (51 percent) than men.

- The median age of immigrants was higher than the national median (37.3 years vs. 32.9 years).

- Immigrant women were older than their male counterparts, with a median age of 39.3 years vs. 35.3 years.

- Individuals between 25 and 34 years of age represented 23 percent of all immigrants, and more than one-half (55 percent) were at least 35 years old.

- Of the 18 million immigrants who were at least 15 years old in 1990, 60 percent were married, 23 percent had never been married, 3 percent were separated, 8 percent were widowed, and 6 percent were divorced.

Educational Attainment

Elementary/Secondary School Enrollment

More than one-half (52 percent) of all immigrants enrolled in school in 1990 were enrolled in elementary/secondary schools. This figure represented about 2.2 million immigrants in the nation's elementary/secondary school system. A majority of these students (81 percent) were non-citizens (Figure 4).

- A great majority of all immigrant students (92 percent) attended public schools; only 8 percent attended private schools.

- Twelve percent of all immigrants (2.4 million people) were between the ages of 18 and 24 in 1990. Of this age group, 34 percent had at least some college education, 23 percent had completed only high school as their highest level of educational attainment, and more than two in five (43 percent) had less than a high school education.

College Enrollment

Approximately 2 million immigrants (including foreign students) were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 1990. This represented 47 percent of all immigrants enrolled at all levels of schooling that year.

- Of these students, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) were non-citizens.
- A majority (75 percent) of immigrant students enrolled in college attended public colleges and universities.

Educational Attainment of Individuals 25 Years of Age and Older

As of 1990, the proportion of immigrants 25 years old and older who held a bachelor's degree or higher (20.4 percent) was equal to that of their U.S.-born peers in this age group (20.3 percent).

Fifty-nine percent of all immigrants 25 years old and older held a high school/GED diploma or higher. Comparable figures for the general population in this age group were 75 percent and 25 percent, respectively.

In 1990, immigrants 25 years old and older held the following as their highest degrees:[5]

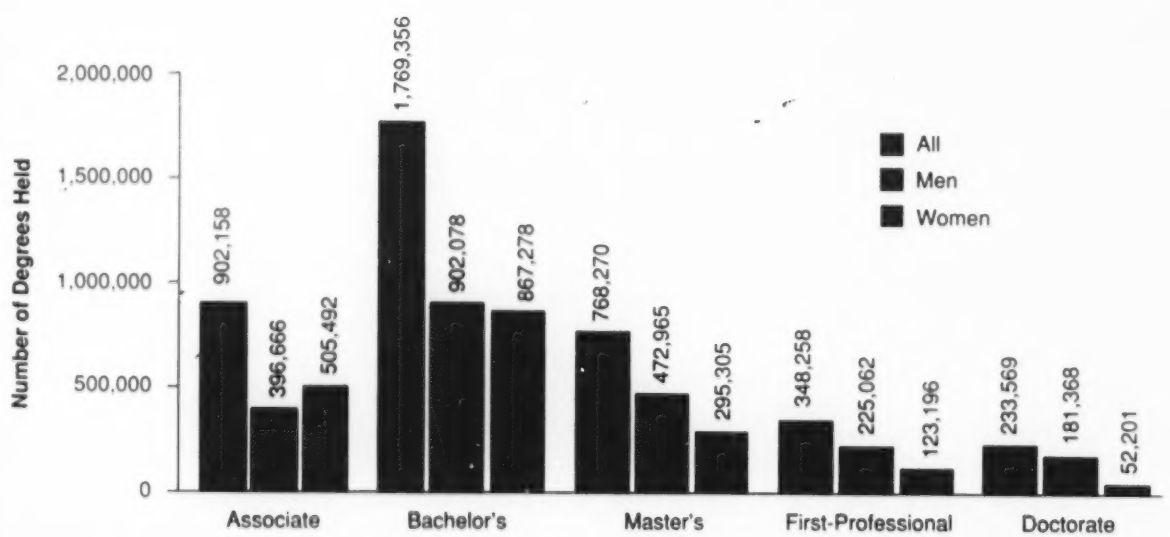
- About 2 percent held doctoral degrees;
- Five percent held master's degrees;
- Slightly more than 2 percent held first-professional degrees;
- Twelve percent held bachelor's degrees; and
- Six percent held associate degrees.

Other educational attainment levels of the immigrants in this age group were as follows:

- Thirteen percent had some college education but no degree;
- About 20 percent held a high school diploma or its equivalent; and

Figure 5

Foreign-Born Persons by Highest Degree Held: Individuals 25 Years and Older, 1990



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *The Foreign-Born Population of the United States. 1990 CP-3-1.* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1993.

- Two in five (41 percent) had less than a high school diploma or its equivalent.

Educational Attainment by Gender

Educational attainment of immigrants 25 years or older varied by gender. Men were more highly educated than women. In 1990, women held more high school diplomas and associate degrees than men; however, men held more bachelor's and graduate degrees. Data on educational attainment and highest degrees held by immigrant women and men in this age group (Figure 5) show that:

- Of the 3 million immigrants who held a high school diploma or its equivalent as their highest degree, 59 percent were women.
- Among those who had some college education but no degree as their highest level of attainment (2 million), slightly more than one-half (51 percent) were women.
- Similarly, more than one-half (56 percent) of the immigrants who held the associate degree as their highest degree were women.
- Among immigrants with bachelor's degrees as their highest degree, 51 percent were men.

Men strongly outnumbered women in highest degrees held at the graduate level. In 1990:

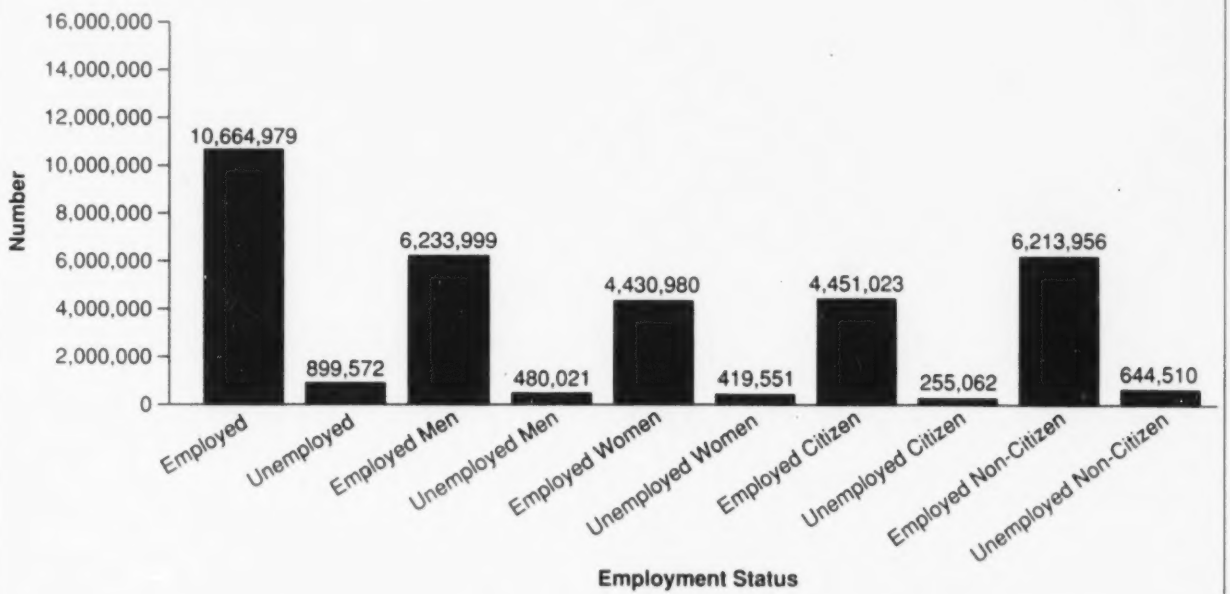
- Of the 768,270 master's degrees held by all immigrants, a majority (62 percent) were held by men.
- Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of the first-professional degrees were held by men.
- The share of doctoral degrees held by men was far greater than the share held by women (78 percent vs. 22 percent).

Language Ability of the Foreign-Born Population

Foreign-born persons come to the United States from all over the world with different linguistic backgrounds. As a result, immigrants have varied levels of English language proficiency. This variability in language ability has key

Figure 6

Foreign-Born Persons in the Civilian Labor Force, 1990



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *The Foreign-Born Population of the United States. 1990 CP-3-1.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993.

implications for the immigrants' preparedness for school, as well as for their successful participation in the labor force. Of the 19.5 million immigrants who were five years of age and older in 1990:

- A majority (79 percent) spoke a language other than English.
- Forty-seven percent reported that they did not speak English "very well." This compares with only 2 percent of the U.S.-born population.
- Twenty-eight percent lived in households where little or no English was spoken.[6]

Many immigrant school-age children have difficulty with the English language. Of the 1.6 million immigrant children (five- to 17-year-olds) enrolled in school in 1990:

- A majority (97 percent) spoke a language other than English.
- About 50 percent did not speak English "very well."
- Forty-four percent lived in households where very little or no English was spoken.

Comparable data suggest that foreign-born adults have difficulty with the English language as well. Among the 17.7 million foreign-born adults in 1990:

- More than three in four (78 percent) spoke a language other than English.
- Nearly one-half (47 percent) reported not speaking English "very well."
- Twenty-six percent lived in households where very little or no English was spoken.

Foreign-born persons who came to the United States after 1980 (newcomers) have more difficulty with the English language as measured by their own self-assessment than did their peers who arrived before 1980. In 1990:

- Among the 15.4 million immigrants who spoke a language other than English, 52 percent were newcomers.
- Similarly, of the 9.1 million immigrants who reported not speaking English "very well," 55 percent were newcomers.
- Newcomers accounted for 64 percent of the 5.3 million immigrants who lived in households where very little or no English was spoken.

Labor Force Participation

About 18 million (92 percent) of the immigrants were at least 16 years old in 1990, and 64 percent (10.6 million) of this population was in the labor force (Census, 1993) (Figure 6).

- The vast majority (92 percent) of the immigrants who were in the civilian labor force were employed.
- Four in five (80 percent) of employed immigrants in the civilian labor force worked full time.

There was a marked difference between the labor force participation of immigrant men and women. More immigrant men than women were in the labor force, were employed, and worked full time.

- While 77 percent of all immigrant men 16 years old and older were in the labor force, only 52 percent of their female counterparts participated in the labor force.
- Approximately 93 percent of the men in the labor force were employed, compared with 91 percent of women.
- Eighty-six percent of the employed men worked full time, compared with 73 percent of the employed women.
- The unemployment rate was slightly lower for men than for women (7 percent vs. 9 percent).
- The unemployment rate was lower among citizens (5 percent) than among non-citizens (9 percent).

Occupations and Sectors of Employment

In 1990, the most popular occupations among immigrants included technical/sales/administrative support fields (25 percent); managerial/professional occupations (22 percent); operators/laborers (19 percent); and service occupations (18 percent). Other occupations accounted for 16 percent.

More citizen immigrants were employed in higher-paying fields, such as managerial and professional fields, than non-citizen immigrants. The fact that citizens

generally have been in the United States longer, are better educated, and communicate better in English than non-citizens, among other reasons, tended to give citizens greater access to better-paying jobs. In 1990:

- More citizens (29 percent) were in management or professional fields than non-citizens (17 percent).

- Conversely, more non-citizens (22 percent) were in low-paying occupations (operators/laborers) than their citizen counterparts (14 percent).

Immigrants were employed primarily in the manufacturing sector (21 percent); retail trade (18 percent); professional services (19 percent); entertainment/recreation services (7 percent); business/repair services (6 percent); construction (6 percent); finance/insurance/real estate (6 percent); and other sectors, including agriculture, mining, construction, transportation, etc. (17 percent).

- Of those in managerial and professional fields (more than 2 million immigrants), 44 percent (902,515) were employed in health services, 29 percent (608,980) in educational services, and 27 percent (561,908) in other professional services categories.

Household Incomes of the Foreign-Born Population

Nearly 8 million immigrant households[7] provided income data for 1989. The median annual household income of the immigrant population was $28,314, slightly lower than the median household income of $30,176 for the U.S.-born population. The data in Figure 7 show large differences in income levels of immigrant households.

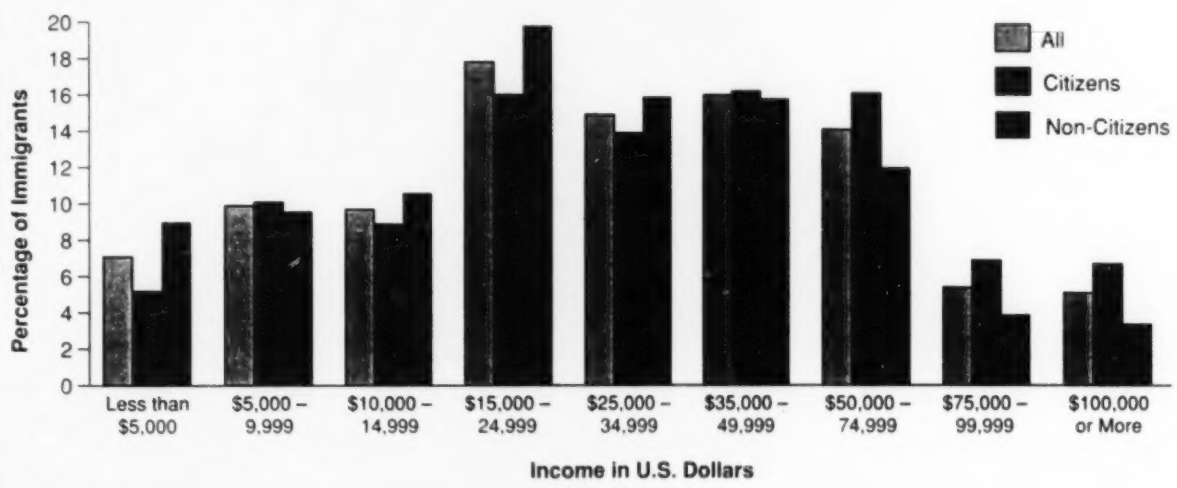
- As many as 45 percent of immigrant households had annual incomes below $25,000.

- Thirty-one percent of immigrant households had annual incomes between $25,000 and $49,999, while 14 percent of the households had annual incomes between $50,000 and $74,999. Those households with higher annual incomes ($75,000 or more) accounted for 10 percent.

- Among all immigrant households, 82 percent had some type of earnings from different sources of income. Among these households, 22 percent had social security income, 9 percent relied on public assistance, and 10 percent received retirement income.

Figure 7

Foreign-Born Population by Annual Household Incomes, 1989



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *The Foreign-Born Population of the United States. 1990 CP-3-1.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993.

Families Below the Poverty Level

Of all immigrant families,[8] 15 percent were below the poverty line (annual family income below $12,675) in 1989. This compares with 10 percent of U.S.-born families. Among all immigrant families who lived in poverty (876,281):

- Eighty percent of the families had school-age children.
- More than one-half (57 percent) of the householders worked in 1989. However, a majority (70 percent) of those who worked held part-time jobs.
- Thirty percent of the families were headed by females in 1989.

Conclusions

The foreign-born population of the United States is growing at a rate four times faster than the total U.S. population. However, there has been a considerable shift in the numbers and origins of these persons. Europe, the place of origin for 22 percent of U.S. immigrants as of 1990, ceased to be the largest contributor; its position was taken by Asia, with 25 percent. Asia and Mexico were the places of origin for nearly one-half (47 percent) of all immigrants living in the United States in 1990.

Significant differences exist between citizen and non-citizen immigrants, largely because as many as 84 percent of citizens have lived in the United States for more than ten years, compared with only 37 percent of their non-citizen peers. As a result, citizens are better educated, communicate better in English, have access to higher-paying jobs, and have higher household incomes than their non-citizen peers.

Some social and economic factors still limit the progress of immigrants. The inability to communicate well in English is a problem for nearly one-half of the immigrant population. This problem is accentuated by the fact that 28 percent live in households where very little or no English is spoken. As many as 45 percent of all immigrant households reported annual incomes lower than $25,000, and 15 percent of all immigrant families live in poverty.

There are concerns for the higher education community and the economy as well. Many school-age immigrant children come from poor families and have difficulty with the English language when they begin school. This population requires additional resources, especially in language instruction, to adequately prepare them for success in school. Also, some members of the adult immigrant population have limited proficiency in English and in the higher-level skills needed for success in the labor force. With a continued emphasis on producing a highly skilled work force to enable the nation to compete with other industrial nations, what happens to the immigrant population will have implications for the United States in achieving global competitiveness.

The higher education community, and the nation as a whole, would benefit from helping immigrants, especially newcomers, acquire the necessary skills they need to make effective contributions to society.

Endnotes

[1] "Foreign-born persons" and "immigrants" are used interchangeably in this *Research Brief* and refer to a segment of the U.S. population that includes all foreign-born persons (including foreign students and illegal aliens) who resided in the United States at the time of the 1990 Census. This population does not include persons born abroad with at least one American parent; persons born in the United States to foreign-born parents; and persons temporarily visiting or traveling in the United States. Usage of the term "immigrants" does not follow the U.S. Department of Justice's Immigration and Naturalization Service's definition of "immigrants."

[2] "Citizens" include foreign-born immigrants who have completed the naturalization process through the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and upon whom the rights of citizenship have been conferred.

[3] "Non-citizens" refers to immigrants who are not citizens, including persons who had begun but not completed the naturalization process at the time of the 1990 Census.

[4] The Immigration Act of 1965 established annual limits on the number of immigrants admitted per country and introduced a new visa preference system based on kinship and employment skills.

[5] "Degrees held by individuals" refers to the highest degrees that individuals held at the time of the 1990 Census. Degrees/diplomas include those awarded by U.S. institutions and comparable degrees/diplomas awarded by institutions outside the United States.

[6] The Census Bureau defines "linguistically isolated households" as households in which no person 14 years old or older speaks only English and no person 14 years old or older who speaks a language other than English speaks English "very well." All the members of a linguistically

isolated household are tabulated as linguistically isolated, including members under age 14 who may speak only English.

[7] A "household" includes all persons who occupy a housing unit. The occupants may be a single family, one person living alone, two or more families living together, or any group of related or unrelated persons who share living arrangements.

[8] A "family" consists of a householder and one or more other persons living in the same household who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption. A household can contain only one family for purposes of Census tabulations. However, not all households contain families, since a household may comprise a group of unrelated persons or one person living alone.

Resources

- The Census Bureau recently published *The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: July 1993 (1990 CP-3-1)*. This report offers general characteristics of immigrants, including social, household, and income characteristics, etc., broken down by nativity, citizenship, and year of entry. For more information, contact the Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, DC 20233; phone: (301) 763-4100.

- The U.S. Department of Justice's Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) collects annual data on immigrants, temporary visitors, and other categories of international migrants to the United States. Each year, it publishes the *Statistical Yearbook*, which contains information on immigrants ranging from port of entry to the state and zip code of intended residence. The *Statistical Yearbook* is available on tapes, diskettes, and microfiche, and in paper copies. Queries concerning data tapes and diskettes may be directed to the Computer Products Office of the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), 5285 Port Royal Road, Springfield, VA 22161; phone: (703) 487-4763. Published reports are available for purchase by calling NTIS at (703) 487-4650.

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